a case of do or die

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by moonrocks

Summary

Gale "Buck" Cleven is in a sour mood. John "Bucky" Egan tries to fix that.

(Set after 1x02 and before 1x03).

Notes

See the end of the work for notes

Eventually, the bombardment stops, but Buck's words linger in John's mind. His musings make John think of home, which by now, surrounded by the vast alien of the English countryside, is a mere abstraction. He writes, of course, but the life he used to live grows intangible the longer the war goes on, the more he leaves solid ground for open air. Buck's comments about his father shake him a bit at the knees, even more than the bombing does. John conjures the image of his own father in his head, stern and embittered, his mother smiling by his side, but he quickly wills it away. It does no good to think about these things. He knows this. He would rather feel nothing at all than the hot sting of something he wants but cannot have.

And that, well, that just makes John think of Buck all over again.

He shifts uncomfortably in his bunk, then finally gets some sleep.

He finds Buck in the mess hall later that morning, eating a breakfast of powdered eggs and steaming black coffee, looking over some maps. John pours himself a mugful, then sits down in the empty seat across from him. He sips at it, wishing for some whiskey to further warm his insides as he watches Buck eat. Buck doesn't stop to look up at him. It's second nature to them; exchanging hellos would be frivolous. Instead, John revels in these quiet moments, the calm after the storm.

"Get any sleep last night after all that?" he asks after a while, growing antsy in his seat.

"Yeah, I managed," Buck says as he maneuvers another forkful of eggs into his mouth.

Buck seems standoffish, more than usual, which doesn't make a whole lot of sense. By all means, their mission had been a success. John ignores it, not letting his confusion furrow his face.

"Just when I had you beat," John says.

Buck chuckles at that, but still, he doesn't look up from his maps. "The only thing 'beat' are these eggs." He motions to the heaping yellow pile with his fork.

John grins. Buck can be hard to read, but when he cracks a smile, John knows he means it. They fall back into silence. Maybe the air is just thick with the anticipation of their next mission, but something is off. It's not like John to sit back and not point it out.

“Buck…” he starts, and Buck finally looks up, disarming John ever-so-slightly. “Look, did I say something when I was drunk that I don’t remember? Because—”

“No, no,” Buck says and waves his fork dismissively. “No, Bucky, I just —” he takes a breath, “I got a lot on my mind.”

Buck doesn’t reveal any more than that. John wants to pry, but Buck probably wouldn’t budge. He’s stubborn like that, immune to John’s prodding, as much as he likes to prod.

John gives him a warm nod, then flags down a fresh-faced soldier on KP duty. “I’ll have whatever he’s having,” he says, finger-gunning towards Buck.

Buck laughs him off and the soldier serves John up a plate of toast piled high with scrambled eggs. John slathers them in catsup, then digs in, smiling at Buck with crumbs on his lips.

The rest of the morning is spent getting a little bit of R&R, then doing routine equipment checks. In the early afternoon, the officers pile into one of the hangars for a lecture on advanced combat maneuvers.

John is only half-listening. Buck is sitting in the seat in front of him, staring intensely as the colonel points to different diagrams on the board. Yet again, his stare is always intense. John is supposed to be taking notes. Instead, he stares at the back of Buck’s head. Blond hair peeks out from the lip of his cap, golden and spun at the scruff of his neck, like the stuff of fairy tales, sunbleached lace against tanner skin. John wants to reach out and brush the tuft with his eraser-tipped pencil, but he holds back. John isn’t the kind to deny himself anything —ask literally anyone in the 100th—but with Buck he tries. Oh boy, does he try. Tries and fails and tries again.

Afterwards, John regroups with his squad, and then meets with the mechanics to go over what adjustments need to be made to his fort. He sees Buck again in the officers’ mess at dinner. Steak and potatoes turn out to be little more than hamburger patties and French fries, but John scarfs it down like it’s the first meal he’s had all day.

Buck is being his moody self. John tries not to think too much about it as he chats away with Curt and the other officers. He attempts to get Buck to chime in on the conversation a couple of times, but Buck never takes the bait, surrendering a one-word answer at most. John nearly throws his half-eaten dinner roll at his head.

“Pub tonight, fellas?” Curt asks once their plates are licked clean and they’re all leaning back in their chairs, belts straining against their full stomachs.

John looks over at Buck who’s already shaking his head. “Oh, come on,” John says and throws an arm over Buck’s shoulders. “Your nose has been out of joint all day.” He reaches over and briefly pinches Buck’s nose between his thumb and forefinger, then pats him on the lapel of his jacket. “It’ll straighten you out.”

By some miracle, Buck lets John pull him out of the mess hall and to the bike racks outside. They ride to the other side of the airfield, hooting and hollering and trying to outpace each other on the way.

Curt buys the first round of whiskey and a ginger beer for Buck. John downs his in under a minute. Buck nurses his drink slowly like he always does, and it just eggs John on to have another, then another. He begins to feel it once it’s his turn up at the jukebox. John flips through track after track before finally landing on “As Time Goes By” from that one wartime picture. He takes another gulp of his whiskey as he eyes Buck from where he’s standing. He still has that sour look on his face, and John knows he’s failed his mission. Buck probably only came to encourage morale.

John listens to the tune, his eyes almost lulling closed at the over-sentimentality of it all. He tries not to think of the first time he and Buck met at flight school. How he had gotten the strange impression that they had met before. When he christened Gale Cleven from Casper, Wyoming with a new, catchier nickname.

The singer croons away:

It’s still the same old story,

A fight for love and glory,

A case of do or die.

When John comes to, Buck is at his side. John nearly startles when Buck’s fingers brush his wrist. “Bucky, you alright?”

The song keeps playing.

The world will always welcome lovers,

As time goes by

The concern on Buck's face just makes the whole thing worse. John feels claustrophobic all of a sudden.

"Yeah," he says. "I just need to get some air."

John pulls away from Buck's grip and stumbles out the back door of the pub. At first, John thinks he might be sick, but the alcohol is just hitting his stomach like a bad bout of turbulence. He can usually handle his booze, but something about the way Buck was looking at him makes him want to expel his insides.

Buck follows not long after. John is at the side of the curb, hunched over with his hands on his knees and taking measured breaths.

"Hey, Bucky, you okay?"

"Swell," John says, gritting his teeth, and straightens, but then Buck's hand is resting on the small of his back and he wants to keel over again. He resists the urge. "You can go back inside."

"Well, I want to make sure you're alright," Buck says in that low, gravelly voice that's always been his signature.

"Really?" John replies, growing a bit exasperated at Buck's apparent obliviousness. "Because you've been acting like a sour puss all day."

Buck's brow furrows at that. He drops his hand from John's back. "Bucky–"

"Look, I'm sorry for dragging you along," John says, trying not to sound as annoyed as he really is. "I know you said you've got a lot on your mind, but that's because you linger on every little fucking thing, Buck. You gotta let go sometimes or at least let me in. You're going to blow a gasket one of these days. Steam is gonna pour out of your ears."

Buck offers no rebuttal, so John lets out an elongated sigh and tips his chin upwards to look at the sky. It's a starless night, and the clouds are heavy like it might soon rain. Shitty flying conditions. For once, John's glad not to be up in the sky.

Chatter and music pour out of the pub. The song has changed. A mid-tempo tune, something lovers can dance to, but not slow enough to alienate the rest of the bargoers. John sways to the swelling trumpets, sarcastically at first for Buck's amusement, then in earnest. He hums along, letting the six whiskey neats he drank fuel him. Buck laughs,

and it's music to John's ears. His mouth splits into a grin and John holds out his hand.

Buck looks at him incredulously. "You're joking."

"No, Major Gale Cleven, I'm dead serious," John says.

He continues to sway on his feet with his arm outstretched. He's shocked when Buck actually takes his hand, and in response, John makes sure to pull Buck towards him with enough force to knock a dame off her feet. Buck, not a dame and always smooth to a fault, remains steady. They jitterbug around each other, slightly offbeat, but it doesn't matter. No one's watching. They dance until they can barely stand upright because they're laughing so hard, and John gets to see a side of Buck he seldom sees. He's light, almost, younger than his already deceivingly young age, and the worry is ironed out from his face. John pulls him in once more and something shifts. They're dancing together now, instead of just at each other. Buck's lips are slightly parted, and he's looking at John for the first time in a while, really looking at him.

Their movements slow, and John can't peel his eyes off Buck. He's beautiful all of a sudden, but in a way John has always known. Who's he kidding, everyone knows it. The Buck back home in Wisconsin had been similarly good-looking—blond with lips like two peach slices—but John would never tell Buck that. He'd take that to his grave, whether or not it came sooner or later.

They've stopped dancing altogether, and they're too close for anyone to see what they're doing and maintain sound enough deniability. John doesn't know what's going to happen. He doesn't know what he's going to do, whether he's going to move away or whether they'll need to be interrupted for him to pry himself away from Buck. Consequently, Buck decides for him, taking a full step back. He drops his hand from John's and breaks eye contact to glance back at the pub door.

It's silent for what feels like a long while, then Buck says: "Thanks for the dance."

John's voice nearly catches in his throat. "You make a good partner," he answers.

Buck smiles then turns, heading back into the bar. The door hinges squeak as the door opens and closes, and then John is alone again. He almost wants to laugh to himself, but he is aching all over. He looks to

the sky once more. Soon enough, he and Buck will be up there again, and this will all be inconsequential, a mere pinprick on the runway behind them.

End Notes

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